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Fading Russian Influence in the Baltic States

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Abstract: Since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's rule in Russia 20 years ago, Russia has lost much of the leverage that it previously enjoyed in the Baltics. On the one hand, Russia has antagonized Baltic states through its wars in Georgia and Ukraine, on the other hand, deep integration in the EU and NATO has pulled the Baltic states from the Russian zone of influence. This article discusses the gradual decrease of Russia's influence in the Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania while considering the increased NATO presence in the region, Baltic energy security, and Baltic Russian-speaking communities.

In mid-March 2020, as the Baltic states were bracing for emergency measures to combat the novel coronavirus, Russian media outlet Sputnik reported that the COVID-19 had been generated in a Latvian lab.¹ Baltic countries are used to the absurdities of Russian disinformation campaigns. Allegations of Baltic female snipers fighting in Ukraine and Chechnya or Norwegian government efforts to promote pedophilia are two among many examples of disinformation narratives originating from the Russian Federation.² It is tempting just to laugh off these allegations as ridiculous. Yet, as Voltaire warned, “Those who can make us believe absurdities, can make us commit atrocities.” These baseless tales leave Baltic citizens wondering why they are told. Why are these fantastic and absurd stories spread?

In 1940, when the Soviet Union occupied Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Moscow's ultimatums to the capital cities—Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius—were justified by similarly absurd accusations about Baltic plans to attack the USSR and to abuse Soviet soldiers already stationed in the Baltics. Since 2014, after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the Russian-backed war in Eastern Ukraine, many Western experts and journalists have wondered if the Baltic states would be the next target of

¹ Barbara Wesel, “Is Russia running a coronavirus disinformation campaign?” *Deutsche Welle*, March 20, 2020, <https://p.dw.com/p/3ZoMs>.

² Amandine Regamey, “Falsehood in the War in Ukraine: The Legend of Women Snipers,” *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, vol. 17, 2016, <https://journals.openedition.org/pipss/4222>; and Inga Springe, “Tikumiņas sardzē. Mīts nr 2: Norvēģi-pedofili [“Guarding our morals, Myth number 2: Norwegians are pedophiles”], *Re: Baltic*, Nov. 28, 2015, <https://rebaltica.lv/2015/11/mits-nr-2-norvegi-pedofili/>.

Russian aggression.³ As former Soviet republics with large Russian-speaking minorities, Estonia and Latvia often seemed to outside observers to be breeding grounds for future conflicts. The Estonian border town Narva, with its large Russian speaking population and its picturesque Hermann Castle facing Russian Ivangorod Fortress just across the Narva River, was especially captivating for foreign media.

Yet, the Baltic reality is more complex. While Ukraine, despite the efforts of the 2004 Orange Revolution, was situated in Moscow's zone of influence until 2014, the Baltic states had gradually, but steadily, pulled themselves from the Russian sphere since the early 1990s. Paradoxically, since Vladimir Putin's arrival in the Kremlin 20 years ago, Russia's ability to influence or even destabilize the Baltic states has decreased. This loss of influence primarily has been of Moscow's own making. The wars in Georgia and especially in Ukraine have antagonized the Baltic societies and brought NATO troops to defend them. At the same time, the political culture in the Baltic states has changed dramatically over the last two decades, limiting Russian influence over their societies. This article discusses these dynamics while considering the increased NATO presence in the region, Baltic energy security, and Baltic Russian-speaking communities.



Map of the Baltic Sea countries (Wikimedia Commons)

³ "World War Three: Inside the War Room," *BBC*, Feb. 4, 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06zw32h>; Daniel Berman, "Will Narva, 'Be Russia's Next Crimea?'" *The Diplomat*, April 8, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/04/will-narva-be-russias-next-crimea/>; and Josh Rubin, "NATO Fears that this Town Will Be the Epicenter of Conflict With Russia," *The Atlantic*, Jan. 24, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/01/narva-scenario-nato-conflict-russia-estonia/581089/>.

Geopolitics

Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian accession to both NATO and the European Union was a geopolitical loss for the Russian Federation. At the same time, it was also a logical result of Baltic aims to “return to Europe,” launched in the late 1980s during the independence struggle. During the 1990s, tensions between Baltic governments and Moscow weakened the solidarities that had existed between many Baltic independence activists and Russian democrats during the *perestroika* years. The sources of these tensions were many: Estonian and Latvian restrictive citizenship laws; Russian hesitations over withdrawing troops from the Baltics; Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian efforts for NATO and EU membership; and different understandings of the World War II history. When Putin became President of the Russian Federation on December 31, 1999, a narrative about the rise of fascism and human rights abuses in the Baltic states already existed in Russia. At the same time, Baltic citizens associated the new Russian president with the bloody war in Chechnya and the promise to “whack Chechens in the outhouse.”⁴

The honeymoon of the early Putin-George W. Bush relationship, intensified by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, made it easier for the Russian Federation to tolerate Baltic NATO membership, which occurred in 2004. At the same time, though the 1998-1999 economic crisis had weakened Baltic-Russian trade relations, Russia was still able to exercise considerable economic and political influence in the Baltics. At the time, there were no NATO or American troops in the Baltics. Until the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, the only boots-on-the-ground NATO presence in the Baltics was the Baltic air policing mission which various NATO member states assured in rotation. However, at the 2016 Warsaw summit, NATO member states agreed to deploy battle groups to Baltic states and Poland. This deployment seemed like a moment of triumph for many in the Baltic states.⁵ For many years, these citizens felt that Western allies perceived both their and Polish warnings about Russia’s imperial ambitions as alarmist. Now Russia through its own actions in Ukraine had proved them right.

Today, approximately 1,200 multinational enhanced, forward presence units are deployed in each of these countries: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. They are led by the United Kingdom, Canada and Germany, respectively, and assemble troops from 17 NATO states. Furthermore, U.S. troops stationed in Eastern Europe via the Atlantic Resolve mission framework regularly conduct exercises in the Baltic states. The Ukrainian experience not only motivated Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to meet the two percent NATO military budget target, but it is significantly increased U.S. military assistance to the Baltic states. Under the Foreign Military Financing program,

⁴ Rémi Camus, “‘We’ll whack them, even in the outhouse’: on a phrase by V.V. Putin,” *Kultura*, October 10, 2006, pp. 3-8.

⁵ Ivars Ījabs, “Mūsu stāsts uzvarējis [Our story has won],” *Satori*, April 7, 2014, <https://satori.lv/article/musu-stasts-uzvarejis>.

the United States has invested \$150 million in developing Baltic defense capabilities and sold defense assets worth approximately \$456.7 million.⁶

The Ukrainian tragedy, therefore, improved the Baltic security environment by bringing allied troops to the Baltics and by motivating the region's governments to invest in the military. Nevertheless, there have been negative changes, too, including a continuous Russian military build-up at its Western border. The Russian Iskander short-range ballistic missiles are deployed 45 km from Lithuania and 120 km from Estonia. There are 30,000 ground and airborne troops stationed close to the borders of the Baltic states.⁷

The Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service that has monitored all Russian military exercises for the past decade concludes that Russia does not look at Estonia as a separate target, but as a part of NATO. From this perspective, an eventual Russian attack on the Baltic states would not arise because of Russian interest in these countries *per se*, but rather due to the need to shift the power balance in the Baltic sea region during a larger-scale conflict with the West.⁸ While large-scale armed conflict between Russia and NATO seems unlikely, Russian intervention in Belarus does not. While such a conflict would not impact the Baltic states directly, it would weaken significantly their security environment.

While it is tempting to view Baltic societies as being constantly and heroically mobilized against the Russian threat, the reality again is more complex. Outside observers often perceive Baltic-Russian relations as constantly hostile and ideology-driven. However, the story of Baltic gas dependency on Russia offers a different perspective. Until 2014, the Baltic states imported 100 percent of their natural gas from Russia, making themselves vulnerable to possible Russian pressures. On the one hand, Baltic dependency was due to the gas infrastructure inherited from the Soviet period that connected all Baltic states to Moscow. On the other hand, as Lithuanian Scholar Agnia Grigas has pointed out, Baltic energy dependency was, to a considerable extent, a self-inflicted problem.⁹ Economic pragmatism, ties between Baltic economic and political actors and Russian business elites, and a lack of easy and cheap alternatives all limited the political will to alter the situation. Until the late 2000s, the gas market looked like a sector of pragmatic cooperation between the Baltic states and Russia.

During the privatization process and later sales, Baltic governments allowed Gazprom and Interim, another Russian company, to acquire substantial stakes in Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian gas companies.¹⁰ At the same time, Russia never attempted to use gas as a tool for coercing the Baltic states, despite political tensions between Moscow and the Baltic capitals. However, Ukrainian and Belorussian gas disputes with Gazprom in the late 2000 made the Baltic states wary. In addition, the

⁶ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political Military Affairs, U.S. Security Cooperation with the Baltic States, July 17, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-the-baltic-states/>.

⁷ Estonian Foreign Intelligence, *International Security and Estonia 2020*, pp.4-5.

⁸ Estonian Foreign Intelligence, *International Security and Estonia 2019*, p. 6.

⁹ Agnia Grigas, "The Gas Relationship between the Baltic States and Russia: Politics and Commercial Realities," Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2012, p. 34.

¹⁰ Grigas, "The Gas Relationship between the Baltic States and Russia," pp. 36-56.

Russian war in Georgia deeply worried large segments of the Baltic societies, putting pressure on the political elites for action on energy. The first to act was Lithuania, which relies on Russian gas more than Estonia and Latvia. In 2014, Vilnius opened a floating liquefied natural gas terminal and increased its natural gas imports from Norway and, in 2017, from the United States. Today, Lithuania has reduced the percentage of Russian gas in its primary energy consumption to 19 percent. Latvia and Estonia, whose primary energy sources are hydropower and oil shale, still import 100 percent of their natural gas from Russia, making it 24 percent and 6 percent, respectively, of their primary energy consumption.¹¹

European Union regulations have contributed further to the decrease of Russian influence in the Baltic energy markets. The 2009 Third Energy Package requires member states to unbundle their gas markets, splitting gas production from gas transmission. While Estonia and Lithuania proceeded to unbundle by 2012, Latvia liberalized its gas market only in 2017. Gazprom tried to fight Lithuania over unbundling in court and used political lobbying in Latvia, but was unable to prevent the reduction of its gas influence in the Baltics.

Latvia is an interesting example of a Baltic state that possesses a Soviet-era, network-based Russian gas lobby among the local elites. During the unbundling debates, local gas import company Latvijas Gāze strongly lobbied for Gazprom's interests.¹² The Chairman of Latvijas Gāze is Aigars Kalvītis, a former prime minister. While his political career was crushed by the 2009 economic crisis in Latvia, he still has a strong network among Latvian political elites. Sixteen percent of Latvijas Gāze is owned by Inter Latvija (a subsidiary of Russian company Itera), and 34 percent by Gazprom.¹³ The president of Inter Latvija is Juris Savickis, a former Latvian KGB officer. Both Kalvītis and Savickis are board members of Latvian ice-hockey club Rīgas Dinamo, which plays in the Russian Continental Hockey League. These formal and informal networks are the strongest Russian assets in the Baltic states. However, their efficacy gradually has decreased. *First*, as unbundling shows, legislation limiting Russian influence in the Baltic energy markets is initiated at the European level. *Second*, since the 2009 economic crisis, the influence of Russian-friendly local oligarchs has been diminished dramatically, mostly through changes in political culture and shifts in voters' preferences.

While the region still buys Russian gas, considerable efforts have been made to build new infrastructure that would integrate the Baltic gas market with European energy networks. In 2020, Estonia and Finland finished the gas pipeline Balticconnector, integrating the Estonian and Finnish gas transmission networks. Because of the existing pipeline between Estonia and Latvia, and Latvia and Lithuania,

¹¹ Derek E. Mix, "Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania: Background and U.S.-Baltic Relations," Congressional Research Service, Jan. 2, 2020, p. 18.

¹² Latvijas Gāze attempts to lobby Gazprom's interest in the parliament, *Baltic News Network*, March 11, 2013, <https://bnn-news.com/gas-market-opening-change-latvia-90361>.

¹³ The website of Latvijas Gāze <https://lg.lv/par-mums/akcionari>.

the project links Finland to the Baltic energy networks. This link allows it to access the Latvian underground gas terminal and the Lithuanian floating terminal. Meanwhile, Lithuania and Poland are planning to finish Gas Interconnection Poland/Lithuania pipeline in 2021.

In sum, integration in the European structures and general mistrust in Russian intentions pushed the Baltic governments to reduce their dependence on Russian gas. Both Russian aggression in Ukraine and the internal fight against corruption have marginalized political actors with close ties to Russian business elites. While Russia is still an important trading partner for the Baltic states, calls for deeper cooperation with Moscow are not a part of political discourse anymore.

Russian Speakers

One of the key elements of Russia's soft power is the so-called "compatriot policy," which is designed to strengthen ties between Russia and Russian speakers living in other countries. The concept of the *Ruskiy Mir*—the Russian World—works in two different ways. *First*, it is a nationalist concept that claims the existence of an imagined Russian-speaking community, scattered around the post-Soviet space, united by a heroic past, orthodox faith, and language. *Second*, it is a neo-imperialist term asserting a special connection between the Russian state and Russian speakers, regardless of their place of residence or citizenship. Following this logic, Russia has a right and a duty to protect the interests of compatriots abroad, even at the expense of other states' sovereignty. Countries with large Russian-speaking communities are part of the Russian World, whether they want to be or not.

Russia's attempts to maintain influence over ethnic Russians abroad is a sensitive question for Estonia and Latvia, given their ethnic diversity. Because of large-scale immigration during the Soviet period, 25.2 percent of Latvian inhabitants and 24.8 percent of Estonian residents are of Russian descent. By contrast, Lithuania is more homogenous, with 84 percent of the population being ethnically Lithuanian. Furthermore, Russian is often spoken at home by Estonians, Latvians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians, making Russian the first language of 30 percent and 34 percent of Estonia's and Latvia's population, respectively. Additionally, a large majority of ethnic Latvians and Estonians understand the Russian language, making Russian media accessible to large numbers of Baltic citizens.

Relations between ethnic communities in the Baltics have been tense on various occasions due to several issues: different perceptions of history, Russian speakers' discontent with citizenship laws, and diverse understandings of the role that Russian language should play in Estonian and Latvian societies. However, these tensions have escalated to violence only once during a dispute over the appropriate burial place of several WWII Soviet soldiers. Until 2007, these soldiers' remains were buried in a Soviet WWII war memorial in central Tallinn. For Estonia, as well as for the other two Baltic states, the Soviet victory in WWII carries a double meaning: it implies not only the end of the Nazi occupation, but also the beginning of the Soviet one. By the early 1990s, the memorial inscription "For the liberators" was changed to "For the fallen in the WWII." In 2007, the Estonian government went further and decided to relocate the monument to a nearby military cemetery. This decision led to

Russian speakers rioting in Tallinn, as well as large-scale cyberattacks against Estonian government institutions, banks and media outlets, originating from Russia.

During the Boris Yeltsin years in power, Russian criticisms of Baltic domestic affairs emerged as a response to the rise of nationalist policies in Latvia and Estonia. In the early 1990s, after regaining independence, Latvia and Estonia passed harsh citizenship laws. According to the Baltic doctrine of state continuity, the three Baltic countries were occupied and illegally annexed by the USSR in 1940, *de jure* continuing to exist through the Cold War, and regained their independence in 1991. While the pre-WWII citizens and their descendants automatically became citizens in 1991, migrants from other Soviet republics, who had settled in these countries during the Soviet era, were required to pass an exam to obtain Latvian or Estonian citizenship. Today, most Russian speakers have passed the required language and history tests, yet a minority has not been able or willing to comply. At the same time, many of these former Soviet citizens have not opted for Russian or any other citizenship. By consequence, 10 percent of Latvian and six percent of Estonian residents maintain the unique status of “non-citizens” (Latvian wording), or persons with “undetermined citizenship status” (Estonian wording): their only citizenship is in the former Soviet Union.

Since the 1990s, the non-citizen’s issue remains a burning issue in Baltic-Russian relations, and a key element in Russia’s compatriot policy. For example, as recently as 2018, Vladimir Putin expressed his hope that the European Union would start to pay attention to the “major violations of the rights” of Russian speakers in the Baltic states.¹⁴ While the Russian Federation has accused these states of human right abuses, Estonian and Latvian governments point out that the path to citizenship is open to everybody willing to learn the official language. Riga and Tallinn contend that these former Soviet citizens are not stateless, since they are under the protection of Estonian and Latvian states. Over the years, Latvia has introduced the concept of *valstspiederīgie* (roughly translated as nationals), which includes both citizens and non-citizens. For example, during the current border closures due to COVID-19, Latvia repatriated all its nationals, citizens as well as non-citizens. However, Estonian non-citizens can vote only in municipal elections; Latvian non-citizens cannot vote at all.

A 2019 survey conducted by the Latvian Office of Citizenship and Migration shows that 23 percent of Latvia’s noncitizens feel unable to pass the exam, and 17 percent refuse to take the exam out of principle. They believe that they deserve to receive citizenship automatically. Fifteen percent of these people are waiting for the government to facilitate access to citizenship, 13 percent are satisfied with their current status, 12 percent enjoy the visa free traveling to the Russian Federation allowed by their status, and 10 percent say they lack time to go through the naturalization

¹⁴ “Putin urges EU to pay attention to Russian speakers’ rights in Baltics,” *The Baltic Times*, Aug. 6, 2018, <https://www.baltictimes.com/putin-urges-eu-to-pay-attention-to-russian-speakers-rights-in-baltics/>.

process.¹⁵ In recent years, Latvia has sought ways to dismantle the noncitizen status without renouncing the principle that the knowledge of Latvian language is an essential duty of the citizen. The compromise solution has been to grant mandatory Latvian citizenship to all children born in Latvia. Until 2019, non-citizen parents could choose between Latvian citizenship and non-citizen status for their underage children. Beginning this year, children born in Latvia are becoming citizens of Latvia automatically. While it is still possible for the parents to register them as citizens of another state, the noncitizen status will no-longer be an option.

The first generation of post-independence politicians considered citizenship laws a good idea. However, now it seems obvious that the noncitizens situation weakens Estonian and Latvian societies, making them more vulnerable to Russian destabilization attempts. While during the Yeltsin era the compatriot policy was mostly political rhetoric, it started to have practical implications under Putin. As Estonian scholar Kristian Kallas has pointed out, in the 2000s, the rhetorical lines became blurry between protection of national interests and compatriot protection.¹⁶ Since 2010, the Russian Federation has strived to consolidate compatriot identity through institutions such as Russkiy Mir Foundation and the Pushkin Institute. In 2014, as Russia annexed Crimea and started the war in east Ukraine, the compatriot policy was often deployed to justify violations of Ukrainian sovereignty.

As noted earlier, these dynamics triggered Western worries about possible Russian destabilization in the Baltics using local Russian speakers as a potential fifth column. During the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, Mike Collier, the chief editor of the English language section of Latvia's Public Broadcaster, received impatient weekly inquiries from his Western colleagues about possible separatist tendencies in Latvia's Eastern region Latgale. Yet, there was nothing sensational going on in Latgale and, as Collier wrote, Latvian Russians seemed remarkably stubborn about being normal citizens of the country.¹⁷

Indeed, over the last six years, no signs exist of either a deep dissatisfaction among local Russian communities or effective Russian attempts to instrumentalize them. A 2016 study shows that 84.3 percent of Latvia's Russian speakers feel belonging to Latvia, 43.1 percent feel belonging to Europe, while only 32.4 percent and 28.3 percent feel belonging to the USSR and/or Russia.¹⁸ Research by Kristian Kallas conducted the same year argues that Russia's compatriot movement in Estonia has been largely unsuccessful and plagued by internal rivalries, favoritism and

¹⁵ Linda Ņikona, Aiga Dambe, "Nepilsoņi tuvplānā – Latvijas iedzīvotāju desmitā daļa [Non-citizens up close - one tenth of Latvia's population]," Nov, 8, 2019, <https://lvportals.lv/skaidrojumi/310241-nepilsoni-tuvplana-latvijas-iedzivotaju-desmita-dala-2019>.

¹⁶ Kristina Kallas, "Claiming the Diaspora: Russia's Compatriot Policy and its Reception by Estonian-Russian Population," *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, vol. 15, no 3, 2016, p. 6.

¹⁷ Mike Collier, *Editorial: Annoyingly Loyal*, Public Broadcasting of Latvia, Nov. 28, 2014, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/features/features/editorial-annoyingly-loyal.a108065/>.

¹⁸ Ieva Bērziņa et al., *The Possibility of Societal Destabilization in Latvia: Potential National Security Threats*, Copyright Center for Security and Strategic Research, National Defence Academy of Latvia, 2016, p. 27.

corruption scandals.¹⁹ Kallas concludes that the territorial and political connections of Estonian Russians to Russia are weak. A 2016/2017 NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence report emphasizes that the effectiveness and outreach of Russia's compatriot's policy should not be overestimated. According to the report, the organization of Russia's compatriot activities abroad is rather formal, not well known among or representative of Russian speaking communities abroad, and characterized by internal conflicts.²⁰

The new Latvian legislation on education shows both the degree of Russian-speakers' integration in the Baltic societies and the lack of Russian influence upon Baltic affairs. In 2018, the Latvian parliament decided to transition from current bilingual education in minority schools toward instruction only in Latvian in all public schools. In 2005, the introduction of the bilingual system was met with a wave of protests from Russian speakers who wanted to maintain the Russian only instruction. As the 2018 reform was being voted on, many feared that the new legislation would spark similar large-scale discontent. Additionally, many feared that Russia would use the opportunity to test its destabilization capacities. Neither of these concerns materialized. The main Russian speakers party *Harmony* did not call its voters to protest the new legislation nor and did not focus on this issue during its 2018 electoral campaign. A smaller and more radical Russian speakers party *Latvian Russian Union* organized several marches, but failed to mobilize large segments of Russian speaking communities. Furthermore, while the main group of participants in the 2005 protests were students, in 2018 and 2019, primarily elderly and middle-aged activists took part in the marches. Latvian State Security Service, in its 2019 report, argues that one of the long-standing problems of Russia's compatriots policy in Latvia is its inability to attract the interest of young people.²¹ While Russia denounced the Latvian reform in international forums, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Russian Duma threatened Latvia with sanctions, it was either unable or unwilling to prompt large-scale protests in Latvia.

Perhaps, amid broader military campaigns in places like Syria, Russia's interest in the Baltic states is limited. As noted, the Estonian Foreign Intelligence report concluded that the Baltic states are a target because of their strategic importance in the Baltic sea region. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence confirms this regional perspective. Its 2016/2017 report underlines that Russia's compatriot policy in the Baltic countries is coordinated by the Regional Coordination Council of Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea countries, and thus they are perceived as being part of Northern Europe and not the post-Soviet space.

Russia's capacity to influence Estonia and Latvia has also been limited by recent developments involving two parties that, in the past, shared cooperation treaties

¹⁹ Kallas, "Claiming the Diaspora," p. 10.

²⁰ Ieva Bērziņa et al., "Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment, Report 2016/2017," NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2018, p. 52.

²¹ Annual Report on the Activities of the Latvian State Security Service in 2019, March 2020, p. 23.

with United Russia party. Estonian Center Party is an ethnic Estonian party, but for a long time was supported by large number of Estonian Russian speakers. In recent years, the party went through a generational change and acceded to government positions. Despite Center Party's previous calls for closer cooperation with Russia, Estonia's pro-Western foreign policy direction has not changed at all under Center Party's Prime Minister Jüri Ratas. Meanwhile, in Latvia, the main Russian speaker party Harmony not only denounced its cooperation treaty with United Russia in 2016, but was also seriously weakened by corruption scandals in the Riga municipality, which has been run by Harmony since 2010.

The Future of Russia-Baltic Relations

Since the beginning of Putin's rule in Russia 20 years ago, Russia has lost much of the leverage that it previously enjoyed in the Baltics. Russia has antagonized the Baltic states through its actions against Georgia and Ukraine, and its deeper integration into the EU and NATO and changes in political culture have reduced Russian soft power. While it is highly unlikely that Baltic-Russian relations will become friendly as long as Vladimir Putin is the President of the Russian Federation, they can be constructive and pragmatic if Russia continues to abstain from interference in Baltic domestic affairs. Russia still is the first trading partner to Lithuania, the second to Estonia, and the fourth to Latvia. At the same time, Russian and Baltic relations increasingly depend on overall Russian relations with the West in general, and with Europe in particular.

